

Saddling the Horse

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An incorrectly saddled horse is like a person wearing poorly fitted boots. The same way our feet begin to hurt and develop sores, the horse's back begins to hurt and develops saddle and cinch sores.

Correctly saddling a horse requires a saddle that is properly fitted, both for the horse and the rider. The two primary types of saddles are Western and English. Since they do not have the same construction, the saddling process is different for each type.

Before the saddling process begins, the horse should be groomed, especially in the saddle and cinch (girth) areas.

Grooming

Grooming involves removing dirt and mud from the horse's body. A horse that is not groomed will get sores in the weight-bearing areas (especially the saddle and girth areas). Grooming stimulates the hair follicles to secrete oil, which helps keep the coat in good condition.

Equipment

The basic grooming equipment consists of a curry comb, hoof pick, hard-bristled brush, soft-bristled brush and a mane and tail comb. The curry comb is used to remove mud and

caked dirt. (Never use the curry comb on the horse's face or below the knees or hocks.) The hard-bristled brush is used to remove the loose dirt. (Never use a hard-bristled brush on the horse's face; however, it can be used below the knees and hocks.) The soft-bristled brush is used to remove the finer bits of dirt and dust anywhere on the horse, even the horse's face. To groom the mane and tail, first separate the tangles with your fingers or a brush, then comb with the mane and tail comb.

The Grooming Process

- Approach the horse at the left shoulder, making sure the horse sees and hears you.
- Slowly move to the throatlatch area, and begin the grooming process by first brushing the neck, followed by brushing the back and cinch area and finally the hindquarters and legs. It is very important to clean and brush the back and girth area so the horse won't get sores from the saddle or cinch.
- Repeat this process on the right side. To move to the right side, place your left hand on the horse's hip and walk closely around the hindquarters. Always talk to the horse in a calm and reassuring voice while you are doing this.

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Safety Precautions

- ▼ Never brush the horse's head while the horse is tied. This is a sensitive area and may cause the horse to pull back.
- ▼ Always stay behind the forelegs because the horse may strike.
- ▼ Always walk close around the hindquarters, keeping your hand on the horse and talking so it knows you are behind it. Remember, this is the horse's blind area.
- ▼ Always stay in front of the hindlegs to avoid being kicked.
- ▼ Always have a 90 degree angle or more between the horse and the tie area (fence, wall, etc.). This is so you won't get pinned if the horse suddenly moves over.
- ▼ Never walk under the horse's head or neck when it is tied. The horse may pull back then lunge forward and pin you against the tie rail, fence or wall.

Hoof Cleaning

A special part of grooming is cleaning the hoof. If the feet are not cleaned properly, the horse may develop an infection called thrush. Clean the feet by removing dirt and rocks from the sole and frog area. It is very important to clean the cleft of the frog and commissure because this is where thrush develops. This also helps prevent bruised soles.

Hoof Cleaning Process

Front Feet

- Begin with the left front foot. Put your left hand at the horse's shoulder and push lightly. This puts the horse's weight on the other foot.
- Slowly move your hand down the leg to the cannon bone and squeeze between the tendon and cannon bone. The horse will lift its foot.
- Grasp the toe for more control, then put your hand under the front of the hoof to hold it. Clean the bottom of the foot with the hoof pick by smoothly pulling the pick from the heel toward the toe.
- After cleaning, put the foot down slowly so your horse knows the foot is being released.

Hind Feet

- Move to the flank area and put your hand on your horse's hip.
- Move your hand slowly down the leg to the cannon bone and squeeze the tendon, just as you did with the front foot.
- When the horse gives its leg, step back to the flank area and bring the leg with you to maintain safe control of the hind leg.
- Step forward and put your inside knee (the one closest to the horse) under its raised leg.
- Grasp the toe and place the feet on your knee. Clean it like the front feet.

Safety Precaution

When cleaning the foot, always move the hoof pick in the direction from heel to toe. Never move the hoof pick from toe to heel because you may jab the horse's leg or fetlock.

Western Saddling

The Saddle Blanket

The saddle blanket is approximately 32 by 32 inches and should be **at least** a quarter of an inch thick. It should be clean. Dirty blankets can cause sores. Place the clean blanket well forward on the wither. It should lie evenly, with equal amounts of material on the horse's left and right sides. Then slide the blanket back until the front edge is only 4 to 6 inches in front of the withers. This smooths down the hair while protecting the wither area. The blanket should lie flat, with no wrinkles, so it doesn't rub the horse's back causing sores.

The Saddling Process

The saddling process involves three steps, which must be done in the following order:

- ➊ Ready the saddle by putting the cinches and right stirrup over the seat and out of the way. Clean any dirt, sawdust, etc., from the sheepskin lining of the saddle.
- ➋ Bring the saddle to the horse's left side. Gently place the saddle on the horse's back, leaving 4 inches of blanket in front of the saddle.

- ③ Move to the right side of the horse to let the cinches down and to ensure they are not twisted. The cinches may require adjusting. The center of the horse's heart girth and the cinch ring should be above the foreflank.

- Put the left stirrup over the saddle horn and out of the way.
- Reach under the horse and grab the cinch ring and pull it to the left side of the horse.
- Thread the end of the latigo through the cinch ring and then through the front dee ring of the saddle. Return the latigo through the cinch ring.
- Tighten the cinch by pulling the end of the latigo until snug.
- Fasten the latigo in one of the following two ways: (1) Place the tongue of the cinch ring into one of the holes in the latigo and then pull the latigo to ensure the tongue is locked in place. (2) Tie a cinch knot.
- Finally, reach under the horse, grasp the back cinch and buckle it to the back billet on the left side. The back cinch should be snug and the connector strap attached.

Important Points to Remember

Be sure there is enough room between the gullet of the saddle and the withers of the horse. (**Rule of Thumb:** If the rider weighs less than 150 pounds, then two fingers should fit between the gullet of the saddle and the withers of the horse. If the rider weighs more than 150 pounds, then three fingers should fit between the fork and the withers.) If there is not enough room, add another blanket!

The front cinch should always be above the horse's elbow area (in the fore flank area).

Safety Precautions

- ▼ Always fasten the front cinch first, followed by the back cinch.
- ▼ Be sure the connector strap is fastened between the front cinch and back cinch. This prevents the back cinch from going into the horse's sensitive rear flank.
- ▼ The front cinch should be fastened slowly and not be too tight. Cinching too firm and tight makes some horses "cinchy," so they lie down or flip over backwards.

The Final Cinch Tightening

Do not tighten the front cinch too tight initially. After the horse is saddled, lead the horse a few steps and then tighten the cinch a little more. Again lead the horse a few more steps and tighten the cinch so that two fingers fit between the latigo (not the cinch) and the horse. It is important to cinch the horse slowly so it doesn't become "cinchy."

English Saddling

The Saddle Pad or Blanket

Horses with high, thin withers will need a saddle blanket, saddle pad or pommel pad placed under the English saddle. This is to prevent the gullet of the saddle from resting on the withers.

Place the saddle blanket or pad well forward on the horse's neck, then slide it back into the withers area to smooth down the hair. There should be 3 to 4 inches of blanket in front of the English saddle; the blanket should also extend beyond the back of the saddle.

The Saddling Process

The saddling process with the English saddle involves five steps, which must be done in the following order:

- ① Get the saddle ready by putting the girth over the seat. The irons should have already been run up the stirrup leathers and placed under the skirt flap so they are out of the way.
- ② Work from the horse's left side. Gently place the saddle on the horse's back. The front end of the saddle should be close to the upper rear edges of the horse's shoulder blades. Be sure to leave 3 to 4 inches of the blanket or pad in front of the saddle. The blanket should also extend past the rear of the saddle.
- ③ Move to the right side. Bring the girth down and check that nothing has twisted. Also check to make sure the billets are properly attached to the girth buckles. Most saddles have three billets and two buckles. Horses that have narrow chests and big bellies should have the girth buckled on the last two billets to the rear to prevent sores in the fore flank. With a broad-chested horse, you can

use the two front billets. To prevent irritation to the horse's withers, push the pad or blanket well up into the gullet of the saddle.

- ④ Go back to the left side to begin the cinching process:

- Reach under the horse and grasp the girth. Bring it up to the left side of the horse.
- Lift the skirt and fasten the billets to the girth buckles. Be sure to buckle the same two billets that correspond to the two billets on the off side (the horse's right side). If a leather girth is used, the folded edge should be to the front.

- ⑤ When you first buckle the girth, adjust it so that you can fit one finger between the girth and the horse's barrel.

Remember, some horses can become very sensitive to the saddling process. After the horse is saddled, lead it several steps and check to see if the girth needs to be tightened. Again, as with the western saddle, it is important to cinch the horse slowly so it does not become "cinchy."

Acknowledgment is given to Steven M. Jones as an original author of this publication.
